

Effective Mentoring for Nontraditional Adult Learners Pursuing an Undergraduate Degree

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Extended Abstract

The demographics of undergraduate institutions are rapidly changing to include the non-traditional adult students. Adult students are returning to school at record rates, and life has often happened to the non-traditional adult student. It is not uncommon for the non-traditional adult students to work full-time and have family responsibilities that challenge their academic success. With cultural changes in higher education, the concept of one-on-one mentorships is expected to expand (Mullen, 2009). Mentoring of nontraditional adult learners requires patience and consistency. One third of undergraduate students are considered nontraditional as it relates to 25 years and older. (Markle, 2015). Although institutions may comprehend the importance of mentoring, there should be recognition of the different types of mentoring relationships. Effective mentoring strategies should focus on academic, career, personal growth and development.

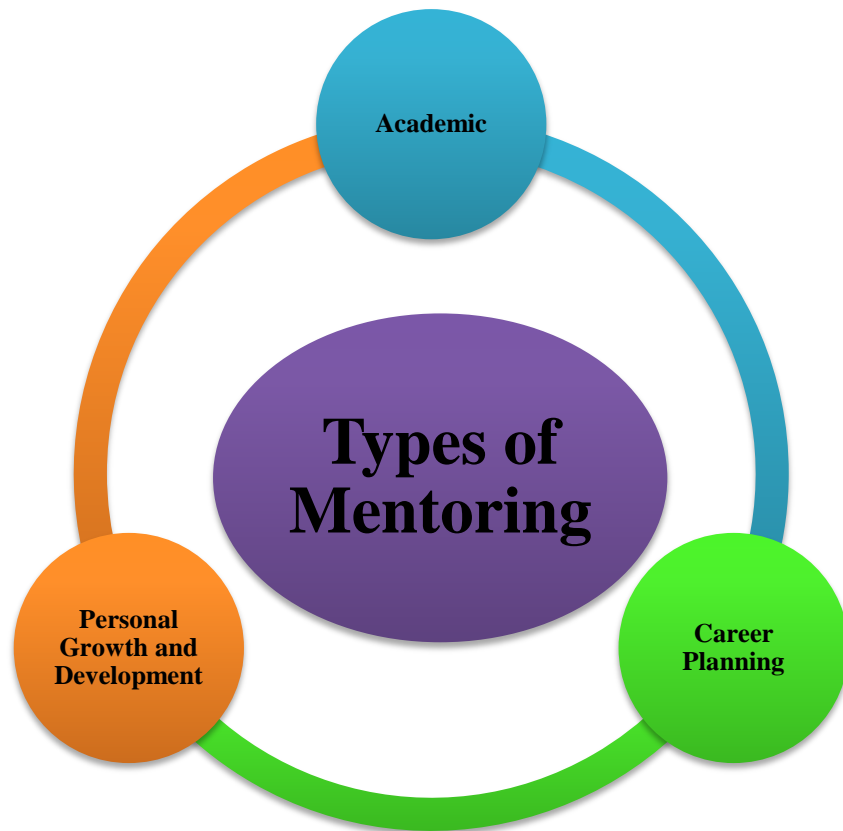


Figure 1. Types of Mentoring

Academic Mentoring

Academic mentoring is supporting learners by understanding their strengths and weaknesses as they relate to their academic readiness. Academic mentoring can be challenging for some learners because they may feel embarrassed discussing their learning difficulties. According to University of Dublin (n.d), academic mentoring should be confidential, built on trust and mutual respect. With the development of a healthy mentoring relationship with the learner, there is potential growth with academic achievement. Academic mentoring should include understanding your syllabus, communication with faculty, note-taking strategies, test preparation, learning styles, taking exams, critical reading, time management, and group study (Arizona State University, 2014, para 1). In order to promote stability with

academic mentoring, there should be an emphasis on learning styles, adult learning theory, and external and internal factors.

In 1992, Fleming & Mills developed the VARK Modalities which were comparable to the theories of Kolb, Gregorc, Mumford and Honey. The modalities include visual, auditory, read-write and kinesthetic. These are the most commonly used terms to describe learning styles. The recognition of learning styles impacts the way in which mentoring is achieved. This is the first step to building a rapport with the learners' ability to comprehend content in informal and formal environments. This developing task should be inclusive with new skills that improve current skills. Further, the adult learning theory must be taken into consideration as the mentor involves the specific learning style that meets the learners' academic needs. The theory focuses on self-direction, experience, goal orientation, relevancy, collaboration, and practical concepts. Self-direction relates to the experience that the learners reveals through their goals. With mentor collaboration, learner goals become relevant to their pursuit of undergraduate education, which is inclusive to practical life experience that is transferable in the formal learning environment.

Consequently, the negative academic experiences can overshadow the positive, which influence the external and internal factors. An external factor is the information that mentors know without knowing the learner personally. An internal factor is information that mentors learn from their learner as the mentoring relationship develops. The internal factors shape the learner's ability to confront educational barriers in the past, the future and the present. Unfortunately, the negative past experiences guide decisions made in the future, but with assistance from a mentor, it can transform a negative experience to a positive one.

According to Multiple Pathways (n.d), there are 10 concepts that promote good learning experiences (para, 7).

- The work was well connected to other ideas and to the real world.
- The content of the learning experience was personally relevant, interesting, useful, or meaningful to the learner.

- The learner had choices, shared authority, control, and responsibility.
- The learning was hands-on and experiential.
- The learner learned from and taught others.
- The learner had the support of a patient, supportive, and nurturing mentor.
- The learning was individualized and although there were standards for the work, the learner could meet them in his or her own way.
- There was a positive aesthetic component to the experience: it was fun or left the learner feeling good.
- The experience helped the learner understand him or herself.
- The learner had success and accomplishment with challenging work.

In all, academic mentoring is essential to the development of the learner's ability to matriculate in college and be successful with their academic tasks. These tasks can improve the learners' ability to enrich their critical thinking skills via mentoring rapport.

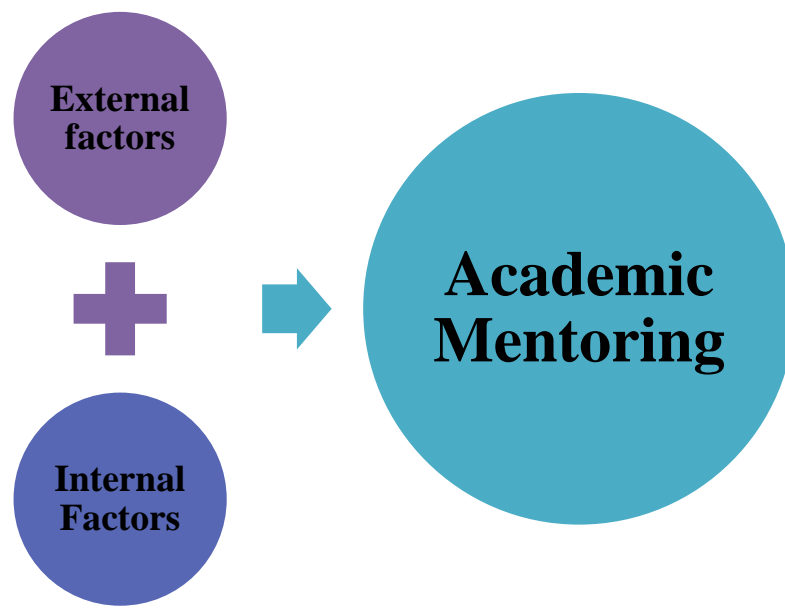


Figure 2. Factors with Academic Mentoring

Career Mentoring

Both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Helen Keller have been credited with the saying that “life is a succession of lessons which must be lived to be understood.” This sentiment is applicable in education as learning can be a hands-on experience that allows students to see how academic learning can impact career development. This helps students make meaning from their experiences and education for greater personal satisfaction and professional success

One of the goals of career services for the undergraduate student is to provide multiple opportunities for experiential learning either through service learning, job shadowing, studying abroad, or internships to afford the student the ability to compete in the workforce. With that, the impetus for career planning may be quite different for the traditional undergraduate. According to Darrell Luzzo, the reasons that non-traditional students attend or return to college is mainly due to unmet needs in their career development domain (1993). Furthermore, Luzzo notes that a comprehensive assessment must be completed to identify the specific career development needs of the non-traditional student (Luzzo, 1993). The career counseling programs are lacking

due to the diverse career development needs of returning students. It is incumbent that counselors clarify the career development differences between the traditional and non-traditional college students (Luzzo, 1993).

When mentoring a non-traditional student, counselors must consider the student's career goals to develop an action plan. A sound action plan should include job shadowing and networking opportunities that not only encompasses the student's goals but contributes to the student's enthusiasm of career success, considering the non-traditional student is returning to school due to career disappointment.

McMahon, Limerick, and Gillies (2004) state that career mentoring should be a guided activity that involves insight into the occupational field and career goal setting. This requires that the student has explicit goals and communicates clear career expectations. Mentoring as a career guidance activity benefits the student by:

- enhanced self-understanding;
- enhanced understanding of the work environment in which they live;
- assistance in identifying pathways to future education and training;
- assistance in feeling better equipped to have control over their futures; and
- enhanced ability to retrieve and evaluate appropriate and relevant career and course information in a deliberate manner (McMahon, Limerick, & Gillies, 2004, p. 8-9).

Career mentoring as a guided activity benefits the student by developing networking skills and an understanding of workplace culture (McMahon, Limerick, & Gillies, 2004). This affords the student confidence to negotiate or overcome any future challenges in the workplace and lends to career satisfaction and longevity.



Figure 3. Steps to Career Mentoring

While the McMahon, Limerick, and Gillies (2004) research was conducted with secondary students in mind, the implications of career mentoring as a guided activity are applicable to the post-secondary non-traditional student.

Personal Growth and Development

Personal growth and development is vital to academic success and matriculation for the undergraduate degree. Forming the motivational core of person-environment fit theories is the fundamental idea that people strive for in work settings that are consistent with their skills, abilities, interests, and values (Dawis, 2002; Holland, 1997). Once an individual is able to locate a reasonably good fit within the occupational world, there is an assumption that he or she will be motivated to engage in these activities because the tasks would be self-reinforcing and intrinsically interesting (Blustein, 2006). The nontraditional adult learners should be centered on the holistic model of how

the learner maintains his or her academic success, while simultaneously achieving optimal emotional, mental, social, and physical self-care.

Nontraditional adult learners often hold a valid apprehension of how they will fit in socially with their younger peers in the newfound or re-experienced academic setting. However, nontraditional students are wise enough to understand that isolating themselves from their younger peers may be academic suicide. The social setting that intertwines the younger, traditional student with the nontraditional adult student provides a concoction of a vast array of ideas, knowledge-bases, cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and resources that all parties involved can benefit from.

The social constructionist perspective in mentoring is that the social learning atmosphere itself tends to be a breeding ground where positive academic results are grown and nurtured from a bevy of multiple angles. Bandura (1977) asserts that social learning theory is based on observational learning and mediational process. People learn based on their interactional experiences with others. As a result, this impacts mediational process with attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation.

The physical health status is highly important in maintaining academic success. It has often been stated that one cannot take care of someone else if he or she is not able to take care of him or herself. This demographic of students must seriously take into account whether or not they truly feel they have the stamina, both mentally and physically, to succeed. In regards to physical well-being, a healthy diet, consistent exercise, and regular doctor's visits, can promote productivity.

This population of learners must accept their age difference from their younger student peers, and apperceive their age and wisdom as necessary tools for their success. It is very common and necessary among this genre of learners to maintain the needed support systems such as family and vested academic mentors. From a mental and emotional standpoint, managing stress tends to be somewhat easier for the nontraditional adult learners. Often times, they have already experienced and overcame the vast array of the vicissitudes of life, such as family loss, divorce, empty nest syndrome,

financial burden, and a myriad of other issues associated with simple activities of daily living.

Johnson and Kestler (2012) investigated the differences with coping in traditional and nontraditional students. He found that nontraditional students are more apt to turn to task-oriented coping strategies to overcome the stressor, such as thinking about the steps to take next and devising a plan of action. Nontraditional adult learners have more adaptive psychological characteristics and these students tend to fare pretty well. It is imperative to assist adult learners with seeking mental health services, if necessary. Personal growth and development should not be overlooked no matter the age.

Further Research

In the future, researchers can conduct a study to measure nontraditional students' perceptions of mentoring support as it relates to academic, career, personal growth and development. These findings will be beneficial to the development of nontraditional support services. Comparatively, further research can focus narrative case studies about student, faculty, staff, administrative, community, and peer mentoring experiences. There should also be an evaluation of established mentoring programs' effectiveness.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, mentoring relationships are vital for traditional adult learners, but the non-traditional adult learner requires the same support with a variety of approaches that are based on the learners' life experiences, goals, family, and current and future employment. Non-traditional adult learners possess internal and external factors that prove rather significant in terms of how they are mentored with academics, career and personal growth. The social, emotional, mental, and physical aspects that are learned to navigate, master, and ultimately overcome adversity are critical to their success of obtaining their degrees.

Mentors should be aware that adult learners may possess a greater level of intrinsic motivation because their mental and career maturity has afforded them a greater conceptualization of having a clearer view of their goals. In

turn, this reciprocal mentor/mentee relationship should serve as a leadership model that is democratic, cooperative, and evaluative. There should not be a one-size-fits-all approach since what works for one student may not work for another. Every situation should be an opportunity to grow as a mentor.

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